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TO RUEHC/SECSTATE WASHDC PRIORITY 0306
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RUEHZS/ASSOCIATION OF SOUTHEAST ASIAN NATIONS
RUEHBK/AMEMBASSY BANGKOK PRIORITY 0578
RUEHBJ/AMEMBASSY BEIJING PRIORITY 0031
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RUEHCN/AMCONSUL CHENGDU PRIORITY 0039
RUEHCHI/AMCONSUL CHIANG MAI PRIORITY 0344
RUEHGV/USMISSION GENEVA PRIORITY 0009

UNCLAS CHIANG MAI 000181

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SUBJECT: CONCERNS OVER SPDC OFFENSIVE IN KAREN STATE

REF: A) RANGOON 1536 B) CHIANG MAI 113

¶1. (SBU) Summary: According to border sources, the Burmese army offensive in Karen State that persisted throughout the rainy season (ref b) is now intensifying, despite continued heavy rains, and appears aimed at crushing the Karen resistance.

Meanwhile, the Karen National Union (KNU) is considering renewed ceasefire talks with the State Peace and Development Council (SPDC). Exile groups along the Thai border have resumed normal movement after keeping a lower profile following the Sept. 19 coup. The Chinese are showing increased interest in talking with anti-SPDC groups. End summary.

¶2. (SBU) In an Oct. 16 meeting with Consulate officers, KNU and other ethnic exiles seconded recent stories of a sustained effort by the SPDC to wear down Karen and other ethnic resistance, destabilizing areas of northern Karen state and causing hardships for Karen villagers and internally displaced persons (IDPs). Checks with UNHCR, National Intelligence Agency and Ministry of Interior offices in Mae Hong Son, Mae Sariang and Sop Moei show a significant increase in IDPs at the border, around 3,000 vs. half that number earlier this year; a deterioration in the security situation would likely step up the flow of refugees on this side.

¶3. (U) According to reports from the Free Burma Rangers, a northern Thailand-based group that provides humanitarian aid to IDPs, SPDC forces are re-supplying at least one front-line unit rather than waiting for the end of the rainy season to continue their offensive. With many roads impassable, this unit is also increasing its use of forced porters to move supplies, the organization said.

¶4. (SBU) KNU Foreign Secretary David Taw acknowledged to ConOffs that the SPDC offensive is hitting the Karen hard, but, citing defectors, claimed that SPDC forces are hurting from the regime's inability to supply and reinforce its own troops near the border. Taw admitted, however, that the Karen forces have little to offer as encouragement to defectors and that the SPDC aims to divide the resistance by sending more troops to the northern areas while leaving the southern parts unharmed.

¶5. (SBU) Taw confirmed that KNU representatives met with SPDC Chief of Military Security Affairs Maj. Gen. Ye Myint in Rangoon on Oct. 5 (ref a). Referring to the Dec. 2003 "gentleman's agreement" between the KNU and former Prime Minister Khin Nyunt, Ye Myint reportedly said, "We don't use that term any more". The KNU Central Committee is now considering Ye Myint's invitation to send a delegation in two weeks for discussions about a possible ceasefire and other issues. "This time we will chose our own delegation," Taw said, explaining with evident awkwardness that maverick Pastor Timothy Laklem and two

others had appeared unexpectedly at the talks. "We know they would like to split the KNU," he said, referring to allegations that the SPDC has engaged in separate conversations with elements of the KNU, including Pastor Timothy, and the Karen National Liberation Army (KNLA).

¶6. (SBU) Asked about the effects of the Sept. 19 coup in Thailand on the border situation, Taw noted that KNU operations were largely unaffected. Thai authorities warned exile leaders not to travel and closed the Salween River for two weeks, but Taw reported that the situation is now back to normal. "Bangkok is busy" with other issues, he explained, and "people at the border are still friendly" as long as the exile groups don't do anything to attract undue attention.

¶7. (SBU) Brussels-based Harn Yawnghe, Director of the European Office for the Development of Democracy in Burma, described holding a half dozen meetings with Chinese officials in Kunming and Beijing, noting "they never listened to us" before. In line with similar reports from the National Council of the Union of Burma (NCUB), Yawnghe attributed this new attentiveness to China's realization after Khin Nyunt's arrest that it needed to broaden its channels of communication on Burma.

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